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Argentine soccer star Diego Maradona is surrounded by securitymen while he signs autographs for fans at the Hotel Carrera in Santiago, Chile on Tuesday.

Saudis get a royal welcome

WASHINGTON, May 18: With exactly one month to go before the World Cup kicks-off in Chicago, the first team arrived in the United States on Tuesday, reports Reuter.

A somewhat startled Saudi Arabian squad flew into Washington's Dulles International Airport on a private plane to a small but noisy greeting from embassy staff and local Saudi children clutching soccer balls and waving flags.

"It was a sort of a crazy scene because the World Cup people didn't know the press had been invited along too," said one source linked to the team.

The media were waiting for the players and their recently-appointed Argentine coach Jorge Solari as they walked to a chartered Boeing 727 for the flight to the New Jersey seaside gambling resort of Atlantic City.

The players weren't expecting anything more than to get off the shuttle bus and on to the plane but they got a kick out of the kids and flags," said the source.

A team spokesman said the players, who are staying at a hotel about 12 miles (18 km) from Atlantic City, had a practice session in the afternoon and would start training in earnest on Wednesday with morning and evening workouts.



We know our first match will be difficult but we have played many matches and will be ready for that one," midfielder Fuad Awad told Reuters. The Saudis play the Netherlands in their first match in Washington on June 20.

The reception of the Saudi players, who play a friendly against the United States on May 25, on arriving for their

team whose recent results have been far from impressive. Tuesday's Dallas Morning News, the World Cup venue's leading newspaper, had brief items from abroad buried among the usual reams of baseball, basketball, hockey and golf.

The Texas City, where American football is practically a religion, has so far had the most muted response to the World Cup with tickets still on sale at every price range for every game to be held at the Cotton Bowl.

World Cup officials said individual tickets remained for only 15 games — six of them in Dallas.

Washington and Chicago, which host the opening match between Germany and Bolivia on June 17, have completely sold out their matches.

World Cup senior press officer John Griffin was adamant that things were looking good across the board.

"I don't think we can be much more pleased than with what we've got right now," he said. "The excitement is building up. Wherever you go there is merchandising in all the shops and the media interest has been unbelievable in the last week.

"It's typically American — people don't really focus until it's about to happen and now it's only 30 days."

first World Cup was a marked contrast to the general level of interest with just one month now remaining.

The New York Times, in a rare front page article on the World Cup last Sunday, asked readers how "The country with the world's smallest interest in soccer would react."

"Will Americans sit up and take notice or will the World Cup pass with the fleeting novelty of a solar eclipse?" it questioned, adding that much depended on the young US

Sacchi's reputation at stake

ROME, May 18: Italy's coach Arrigo Sacchi has seen his carefully laid plans go horribly wrong with the World Cup finals in sight, reports Reuter.

The meticulous Sacchi guided the three-times world champions to the finals during a run of just one defeat in 19 games after taking over the ball in October 1991.

But Italy's claim to a place among the pre-tournament favourites was dented by successive defeats against France and defending champions Germany.

"This is the most difficult moment since I was given the job," Sacchi, 48, confessed after that humiliation.

A slight, bald-headed man, the Italian talks on tactics with an evangelist's fervour have won plenty of converts to his

adventurous coaching methods during his four years at AC Milan.

Brought to the club from then Second Division Parma by tycoon Silvio Berlusconi in 1987, the innovative Sacchi perfected the "pressing" game with a flat back four adopting a zonal marking system and the other players urged to give opponents no time to dwell on the ball.

Once possession had been won, a superb attack spear-headed by Dutchmen Marco van Basten and Ruud Gullit did the rest.

Sacchi's Milan won the league in 1988 and took the European Cup in the next two years, his tactics helping to change the face of an Italian game previously stifled by caution.

A one-time travelling shoe salesman who had failed to make the grade as a profes-

sional player himself, Sacchi's obsessive nature finally brought him into head-on collision with leading players such as Van Basten and he left Milan in 1991.

But the Italian Soccer Federation soon summoned him to lift the spirits of a team who had surprisingly failed to qualify for the 1992 European Championship finals.

Sacchi guided Italy to the World Cup finals without undue alarm, although his press critics were swift to point out that the results disguised some fairly ordinary performances.

Unhappy with the media attacks, Sacchi has become increasingly prickly with critics who have in turn used the recent setbacks as a welcome stick with which to beat him.

The coach has called up 70 players to his various squads, prompting criticism that he does not know his best team.

Ramon Medina Bellow, who plays for Yokohama Marinos in Japan, may be given a trial.

They play Israel at Tel Aviv on May 31 and Croatia in Zagreb on June 4.

Maradona respects Japan's stance

SANTIAGO, May 18: Argentine soccer superstar Diego Maradona on Tuesday said he's not angry at Japanese authorities who banned him from entering Japan because of his past drug problems, reports AP.

"Each country has its own laws, and while I don't approve of that Japanese law, we all must respect it," the 33-year-old player told reporters as he arrived.

Japan officials refused a visa to Maradona last week, prompting the Argentine Soccer Federation to cancel two games scheduled there as part of its national squad preparation for the upcoming World Cup in the United States.

Instead, the Argentine team will play Chile here Wednesday.

Maradona also dismissed criticism by some Argentine newspapers after he and other team members were seen at a Buenos Aires discoteque late Saturday.

"Everybody owns his own life," he told reporters. "I just went out with my wife to drink something, and I have the right to do that."

"We are all adults and we know how we must take care of ourselves while preparing for the World Cup," he added.

Maradona talked to reporters at the Santiago airport after the two-hour flight from Buenos Aires, the Argentine capital.

He told reporters he is "fine, real fit" for the World Cup.

"We really appreciate the opportunity to play the Chileans, because this match will be very important as a warm up," he said.

"We have to continue the development as a team."

"I hope me and my teammates will offer a fine soccer show tomorrow," he added.

Caniggia sidelined

BUENOS AIRES, May 18: Claudio Caniggia, back from a 13-month ban for cocaine use, will miss Argentina's friendly with Chile in Santiago on Wednesday, reports AFP.

However, Diego Maradona, whose criminal conviction for cocaine use led to Argentina pulling out of a tournament in Japan because he was refused a visa, will be fit to play.

Argentine coach Alfio Basile said Caniggia had a leg strain and he did not want to take any chances.

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DPRK refuse

TOKYO, May 18: North Korea said Wednesday it would not take part in team events at the Asian Games to be held in October in Hiroshima, Japan, according to the Asian Organising Committee, reports AFP.

Pak Myong-Chol, president of the North Korean Olympic Committee, announced the decision by fax without giving any reasons to the organising committee earlier Wednesday, a spokesman said.

North Korea, absent from major international sporting events for a year, had failed to make the May 5 entry deadline for team events at the quadrennial regional Olympics.

England gun Greece down

LONDON, May 18: Captain David Platt scored twice as England, who are not going to the World Cup, crushed qualifiers Greece 5-0 at Wembley on Tuesday, reports Reuter.

Darren Anderton, 1986 and 1990 World Cup veteran Peter Beardsley and Platt scored between the 24th and 45th minutes as the Greek defence wilted under the English pace.

Three halftime substitutions, including a 74th Greek record-equaling cap for striker Dimitrios Saravakos, did little to improve Greece's chances of finding a way back into a one-sided contest.

Platt, whose first-half goal was a penalty, headed his 23rd goal in 47 internationals nine minutes after the interval as coach Terry Venables celebrated his second successive victory since taking charge.

Striker Alan Shearer scored the fifth goal 11 minutes later with a crisp grass cutting shot that went under beleaguered Greek goalkeeper Christos Karkamanis, playing in only his second international.

On this performance, Greece must be the whipping boys in the Boston-based Word Cup Group D, which includes two-time winners Argentina, Bulgaria and Nigeria.

They had just one shot on target all night, a sixth-minute drive from their most positive player, Nikos Tsiantakis.

England goalkeeper Tim Flowers, like his opposite number playing in only his second international, did not have a single save to make after the break. Long-distance shots from Tsiantakis, 36-year-old Tassos Mitropoulos and

Caitainyiotis Tsaluchidis all went narrowly wide.

Early play was even as the Greeks played a possession game in midfield on a Wembley pitch made slippery by a day's steady light rain.

The first goal always seemed likely to come from a mistake on the wet pitch after England defender Tony Adams slipped in the opening minute and nearly let Greek striker Nikos Machias through.

It duly arrived in the 24th minute when Karkamanis let left-back Graeme le Saux's low cross slip from his grasp and Anderton darted in for his first goal in his second international.

In the 36th minute Platt pulled the ball neatly away

from Tsaluchidis and turned it square for Beardsley to score.

Two minutes later Greece had a miraculous escape when, from an Anderton cross, Platt had a shot blocked by Karkamanis' feet, then the keeper palmed Shearer's header from the rebound to the bar.

Just before the break Thanasios Koltzidis, an inexperienced stopper standing in for absent veteran Stylianos

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